



April 8, 2018

FAITH AND DOUBT MAKE GOOD DANCE PARTNERS

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JOHN 20:19-29NRSV

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

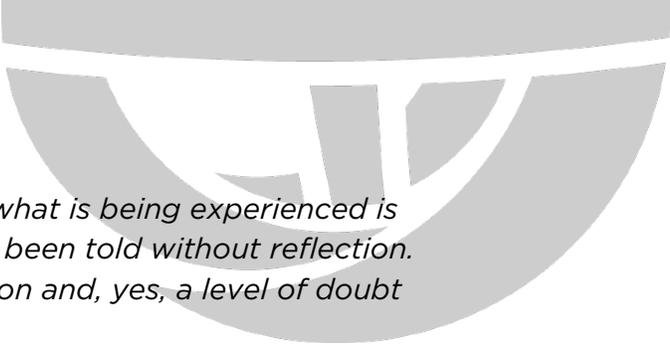
²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Let us start by saying this - you all ask some really good questions. We can't possibly address all of your questions today, so we've chosen three common themes, and will hang on to the ones we don't get to for some time in the future.

Here's a thought one of you shared:



“Doubt is inherent in faith. If there is no doubt, then what is being experienced is not faith, but is rather blindly believing what one has been told without reflection. [This is] potentially dangerous. But faith with reflection and, yes, a level of doubt (uncertainty), is a precious gift.”

Our hope this morning is to invite you along on a journey of reflection. We aren't going to claim to have all of the answers, but I hope we'll open up, and maybe give some permission, for deep wondering about God.

We like how Anne Lamott puts it:

“The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.”

One of you asked, “Do pastors have doubts?” Yes. Absolutely.

When we encounter Thomas in John 20, he is in the midst of emptiness and discomfort and grief. He missed Jesus' first post-resurrection appearances. He longed for some light to return. But what I think he longed for more than certainty was to feel that deep sense of abiding with Jesus that he had come to know. All along through the gospel of John we've witnessed that belief doesn't equate to an assent to dogma or creed, but rather belief is synonymous with being in relationship with Jesus. Thomas longed to be in relationship with Jesus. He longed to abide in God's presence. So often I think our doubts arise from that same place – a longing to sense God with us.

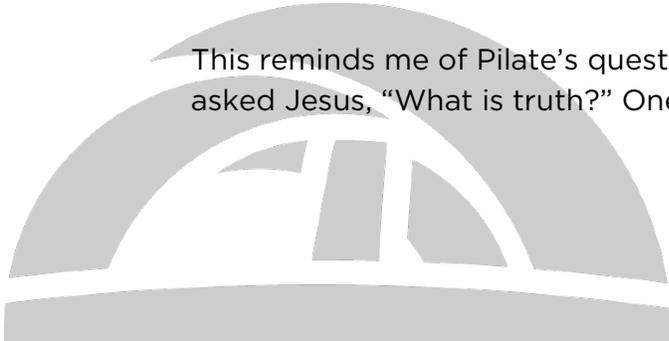
We like Rob Bell's perspective:

“For many people in our world, the opposite of faith is doubt. The goal, then, within this understanding, is to eliminate doubt. But faith and doubt aren't opposites. Doubt is often a sign that your faith has a pulse, that it's alive and well and exploring and searching. Faith and doubt aren't opposites, they are, it turns out, excellent dance partners.”

This morning our hope is to allow faith and doubt to dance together. You might not agree with everything we have to say. But that's okay. Faith is a journey.

Question #1

What if I don't believe that everything in the Easter story is literally true? Can the resurrection story still have truth and power for my life?



This reminds me of Pilate's question to Jesus shortly before his crucifixion. Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” One error I believe Christians have made in the last



couple hundred years is that we have shrunk the definition of truth to fit our time and place. We have tried to wedge ancient mystical truths embedded in stories, which have power to transform the way we experience the world, into a rigid set of facts that may or may not have much bearing on one's life.

I don't know about you, but I need Jesus to be more than a set of flashcards that I get right or wrong. I need God to be more than I can fully comprehend through my own experience. The Easter story is not easily digested in bite sized facts. It is a story so big, so outside our experience that it is literally incredible - or unbelievable. In biblical Greek "incredible" is the same word that Jesus used with Thomas for "doubt" - *apistos*. So, perhaps God already knew how outlandish this act of resurrection was, and how easily people may struggle to fully embrace it.

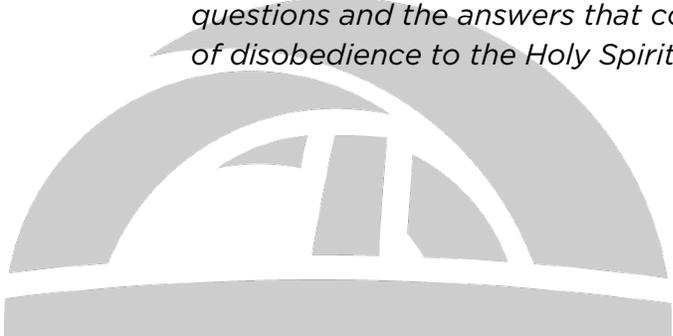
This question had a second part. If we don't believe everything in the Easter story as literally true, can it still have truth and power for our lives? I sure hope so. As I see it, the resurrection of Jesus is consistent with who God is throughout Scripture and history. The resurrection offers assurance that God will continue to bring life out of death, in small and large ways. Rather than approach this story simply as a factual event, what would happen if we saw this story as true in a way that invites us to look for places in our own lives where God might be working to bring new life? In doing so, we might come to see the power of Christ's resurrection in new ways.

Question #2

How do we know ours is the true religion? There are so many spiritual traditions and religions. The messages often come across as strong and true, and us as Christians being "right." I wonder sometimes if we are the ones that are wrong?

This is a great question. There are a few different approaches to take in responding to this one. One approach is an exclusivist approach, believing that only one of us can worship the one, "true" God. We declare that Jesus is the only way to experience God, and other faith traditions are wrong. Another approach is an inclusivist approach. Through this perspective we profess to see God fully, while holding up that people of other faiths may see God partially, or even dimly. A third way is a pluralistic approach, in which we believe we honor the same God, even though we understand and experience God in different ways, by different names, and from a different perspective.

I read the words of a bishop from Lebanon who once said, *"To ignore the questions and the answers that come from people of other faiths would be a kind of disobedience to the Holy Spirit"* (Metropolitan Georges Khodr). Yet so often





Christians are fearful of discovering the presence of God, which we know in Christ, in the religious lives of people of other faiths. Why?

I think some of our trepidation actually comes from the gospel of John. Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Many people cling to this verse as providing the answer to our question. But I think it’s interesting to go back to the context in which Jesus provided this response. Jesus is sitting with his disciples. They’ve just shared in their last supper together. Jesus tells his followers that where he is going, they cannot go. And it is our friend Thomas, of all people, who asks Jesus, “Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?” And Jesus responds with, “I am the way...” At its core, Jesus’ response isn’t an exclusivist response. It’s a pastoral response. It’s a word of comfort to his followers who are already anticipating their grief. Jesus reassures them again that through his love for them, they will experience the love of God.

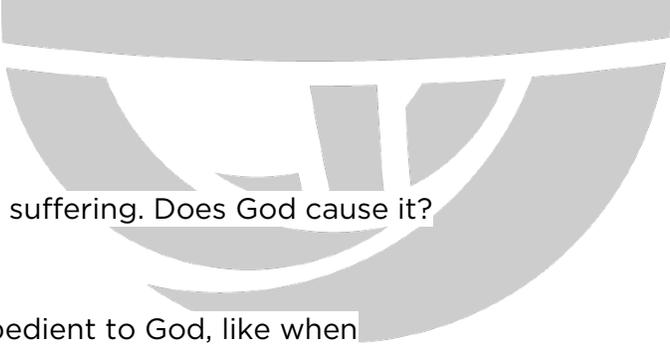
I struggle with an exclusivist view of Christianity being the only truth, primarily because there is nothing in Jesus’ ministry that reflects exclusivist theology. Jesus kept company with everyone in the world of his day. The people we may qualify as people of other religions today, are the very people Jesus included – a Roman centurion, a Syrophoenician woman, faithful Jews, a good Samaritan. Throughout his ministry, Jesus continually stretched the boundaries of who was included in the kingdom of God. And the longer I live, and the deeper I study, and the more I experience God in the places I least expect God to be, the bigger God’s kingdom grows.

Here’s what I know for sure. One of my closest friends is Muslim. Over the course of the past several years I’ve probably had more conversations about God with him than with any other single person. The deeper we dig into our faith and our experience of who we hear God calling us to be in the world, the more united our experience of God becomes. As you explore this question for yourself, here’s my challenge for you – find a friend who follows one of the other great faith traditions. Talk about how you experience God’s love. And you just might discover that God’s kingdom is a lot bigger than you previously imagined.

Question #3:
Where is God in the midst of suffering?

A number of people asked questions related to suffering. This is certainly a topic which deserves more than three minutes’ response. But here’s a start...





For millennia people have wondered where God is in suffering. Does God cause it? Does God allow it to happen? Does God even care?

The Bible ties suffering to sin; when people are disobedient to God, like when Israel is sent into exile. But, when the religious authorities asked who sinned to cause a man to be blind, Jesus is clear that it wasn't sin that caused his suffering. And in other instances suffering is a result of faithfulness, like when members of the early church are imprisoned for their faith in Jesus. With no consistent answer, I wonder if suffering is something that exists because of the complex nature of the world in which we live.

So, where is God in the midst of suffering?

We just recounted during Holy Week what kind of God we follow in Jesus; a God who willingly and freely suffers with us and on our behalf. A four year old boy asked his dad, "When we put bread and wine together, does it make courage?" I believe so. It makes courage to trust that the God we follow is not in some distant heaven, like Zeus, unconcerned with the suffering of this world. No, the God of Jesus is different than that. "This is my body. This is my blood given for you." He shows us the power of God in the sign of the cross, when he refuses to escape the suffering that is assigned to him, and takes it on giving up everything. And then as unbelievable as it is, the resurrected Jesus comes to Thomas to show him the scars as testimony to the depths of God's commitment to love the world.

So, if this is the kind of God who meets us in Jesus, is it any wonder that we have questions and even doubts sometimes. He shatters our assumptions of what we think God should be. He invites us to find comfort in his way, even while making room for others who don't fully understand it. He shows us his love by suffering for us and with us. He calls us into a dynamic, lifelong relationship; a dance of discovery and questions; not for the sake of knowing all the facts about God. Rather, so that our faith aligns us with a story that feels true, life-giving, and meaningful. One of the questions I think God wants us to dance with is: What difference does Jesus make in how we experience the world? The only way to know, is to pay attention to what Jesus does, ask questions, and see how that changes you. Like Thomas, it may make all the difference.

